

Germany: Students protest planned education cuts

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On June 5, around 2,500 students and university teachers took to the streets to protest against the planned closure of the Romance Studies and Philosophy departments at the University of Duisburg-Essen. The widespread anger among students at this new round of cuts was manifested in the collection of more than 7,000 signatures in about two weeks, which were turned in at the chancellor's office on the same day.

Romance Studies is an umbrella academic discipline that covers the learning of Romance languages along with their literature. The planned cuts at the university mean that students will no longer have the opportunity to complete a degree in French and Spanish or in their corresponding literature.

At the campus, there is a widespread fear among students and staff that the newly appointed vice chancellor's plans for "structural optimisation" will soon mean further substantial education cuts—especially in the humanities.

For its part, the university administration made absolutely clear that its measures were in tandem with management decisions to phase out subjects that have "less student enrolment and little profitability."

In a brief comment reported in the Ruhr-based daily WAZ, Dirk Hartmann, the vice-dean for humanities, confirmed that two positions in the Philosophy department were insecure and that this will severely affect bachelors (BA) students taking these subjects.

During the last couple of years, German universities were compelled to amend their traditional degree courses into "internationally competitive" BA and masters (MA) programmes, resulting in considerable changes to course duration. Recently, the Romance Studies departments at the Duisburg-Essen campus were compelled to adopt these new formats in order to make them "attractive" for student candidates.

Hartmann commented that "planned cuts in professor

positions will mean the constant switching of lecturers [who are often employed under limited contracts], leaving students with limited options which in turn will have an overall adverse effect on the quality of education."

Helmut Jacobs, professor of Spanish language and literature, was also quoted in the only other brief press report on this issue: "We are working with a minimum staff—two for Spanish and two for French. And this leaves no room for any further cuts. If the professorship for French is cut back as planned, it will be no longer possible to ensure qualified teacher training at the campus for which the university has made its name since the seventies."

The universities in the Ruhr area were built during the 1970s as part of a social-democratic programme of social reforms. Since then, they have been subjected to gradual privatisation, especially during the last few years, in line with the "reform" of public spending budgets. Following a cost-cutting merger, the universities of Essen and Duisburg in the Ruhr were merged in 2003 with subsequent cuts to university staff and services.

Widely discredited among its popular base, the former coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens was ousted during the last federal elections in 2005. In its place, a grand coalition of the SPD, Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union took power. The grand coalition has basically intensified the same programme introduced by its predecessor and in 2007 implemented a €500 per semester tuition fee despite considerable student protests (See: "Germany: Students protest implementation of tuition fees")

In this context, appeals made by Hannelore Kraft, the head of the SPD faction in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) parliament, "to defend minor subjects at universities" are worthless. Kraft evidently thinks the electorate suffers from political amnesia and is unable to draw a balance sheet of the previous political record and

anti-welfare measures carried out by the SPD at both a state and federal level.

Confronted with a record historical slump in its popular support, the SPD is now seeking to pose as the champion of public education. The SPD student organisation JUSOS has initiated a poster campaign bearing the slogan “Education is a basic right,” with the poster pasted around the university by the student organisation of the Left Party, the SDS. In fact, at the grassroots level, the education campaign by the SPD and its backers in the Left Party is entirely tame, limited merely to a signature campaign to “put pressure on the chancellor” and a possible symbolic day of protest.

“It cannot be that the European cultural city of 2010 [Essen] is doing away with humanities,” Kraft thundered at the state parliament recently. She then went on to demand that minor subjects be protected and told deputies that the Christian Democratic-led state government had brought about a catastrophe for education with its implementation of the Law for the Independence of the University (HFG). The HFG of October 2006 abolished the status of universities as public institutions in NRW. Universities have since become “independent,” paving the way for the implementation of tuition fees and other deregulatory measures.

According to Pascal Geissler, the student representative of the audit committee to ensure teaching and educational quality at the Duisburg-Essen campus, there had been virtually no qualitative improvement in the conditions at the university—despite the funds drawn from the tuition fees during the last three semesters.

Geissler pointed to the problem of overcrowded classes with students waiting for months to collect their certificates because younger staff employed at the campus could not examine students. “Amidst all this, the chancellor is expecting to cut back professorships at the university,” he wrote in *befog-aktuell.de*.

Geissler confirms that the university administration enrolled 3,000 students less than in the preceding academic year. Rather than improve the situation, the implementation of tuition fees had in fact had an “evident chilling impact.”

The official university web site stresses the pressure of financial restraints, saying that the campus has “the challenge to be competitive with other universities because it is absolutely necessary to win state funds that are granted only on performance—in terms of successful graduates, the number of doctorates and especially research activity which can secure third-party funds [from

industry].”

Since being declared “independent,” 20 percent of the minimal state funds allocated for universities are dependent on “performance.” During the last three years alone, the state government has cut €10 million in funding for the Essen-Duisburg University—€6 million due to alleged “poor performance.” This sum amounts to the equivalent of funding 200 university posts.

According to the university authorities, the campus budget is running at a deficit, with only 92.5 percent of all its current expenses covered, notwithstanding the inflow of tuition fees. It is on this basis that the new chancellor will decide on the fate of the department of Romance Studies and other areas of learning. The university management has already announced it will be discontinuing its courses on design technology and Japanese socio-linguistics.

Relevant discussion forums make clear that students are increasingly confronted with the problem of whether to study a subject that interests them or instead pick a topic at university that is considered profitable by big business and linked to shifting market trends. Increasingly, students are being left with no choice as available courses—especially in the sphere of humanities—are vanishing.

University budgets starved of public funds will not only lead to an increasingly narrow choice of degree subjects but will renew calls for an increase in tuition fees in the coming period. This development is not limited to campuses in the Ruhr but is symptomatic of universities throughout Germany. Rather than being a right, education in Germany is increasingly being subordinated to the dictates of lucrative business interests.

Also see:

Germany: New university tuition fees threaten students with poverty

[10 March 2007]

Germany: Students protest implementation of tuition fees
[4 May 2006]



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